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ABSTRACT

One of the best means to create student awareness of play structure is through assigned reading and classroom discussion of successful plays used as models. Various plays from the 1982 edition of "Best Short Plays" are appropriate for discussion of the following structures and techniques: (1) development of conflict and action, suspense, and episodic or collage structure, (2) dramatic issue, (3) characterization, (4) use of language, (5) creation of mood, (6) development of theme, and (7) techniques of comedy. Studying these plays and the principles they illustrate will not automatically make students better playwrights, but reading must help writers. Even poor plays may provide negative models and any work may expose the student playwright to a new interpretation of life. Like painters, playwrights experience three phases of growth: imitation, experimentation, and individual vision and mastery. Only after students understand the basic dramatic and theatrical forms should they be encouraged to experiment beyond them. (Titles from "Best Short Plays" from 1981, 1982, and 1983 that illustrate the aforementioned structures and techniques are appended.) (HTH)

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MODELS IN THE TEACHING OF PLAYWRITING

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RAMON DELGADO

MODELS IN THE TEACHING OF PLAYWRITING

About a month ago a section of a Connecticut bridge on U.S. Highway 95 collapsed, dumping a couple of cars and trucks into the water below, killing three people, snarling the traffic for miles in both Connecticut and New York. The expenditure of several million dollars was required just to make temporary repairs for the passage of traffic. The initial investigation focused on one large bolt which apparently gave way under the tension and weight of constant use. But later deliberations concluded that the primary reason for the disaster was that the arch made to support the roadbed of the bridge was not designed well enough to bear the traffic. The question I pose today is "How can we as playwriting instructors help our students design structures which will bear "the two hours traffic of our stage?"

Though my undergraduate students start on scripts considerably shorter than two hours, one of the best means that I have found to create student awareness of play structure is through assigned reading and classroom discussion of successful plays used as models--not necessarily models for imitation--though that couldn't hurt--(We are told that Arthur Miller taught himself the

craft of play structure by copying in longhand out a couple of Ibsens' plays. And the autobiography of another famous playwright's wife contains this passage (See if you can guess the playwright referred to.):

> "He wanted to write plays, that is understood . . . But he was undisciplined, he told me, not only in working habits, but in writing itself,--what form to use, and how. Then he began consciously to use a method which he kept up for over a year. He read nothing but plays, great plays, melodrama . . . Before long he was thinking in dialogue and answering his own thoughts more or less aloud in his low voice, seeing life in scenes and acts--with the curtain going down perhaps, as he went off to sleep."[1]

That playwright was none other than Eugene O'Neill.

Though we live in the aftermath of the rebellious 60's and the narcissistic 70's when the forms of the past have been challenged, abandoned, turned upside down and inside out, if we only encourage our students to express themselves without helping them to channel their ideas into a dramatic and theatrical form, then we deprive them of a foundation on which to develop. I was reminded of this need for the necessity of studying form a couple of years ago when I had an opportunity to marvel through the Picasso exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. Despite our image of

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1. Agnes Boulton Kaufman(second wife of Eugene O'Neill). Part of a Long Story. Cited by J. William Miller in Modern Playwrights at Work. New York: Samuel French. 1968.

Picasso as a revolutionary in contemporary art, an innovator and experimenter, this comprehensive retrospective demonstrated that as with most accomplished artists the earliest works were either imitations of the accepted traditional forms or imitations of the contemporary innovators. In Picasso's case both the classical and recent influences were at work--El Greco from the 16th and 17th century, and the then current influences of Toulouse-Lautrec, van Gogh, and Cezanne. Then, as with most artists, a second phase began--a phase of experimentation in the elements of his art--his cubistic and abstract phase climaxing into the third mature phase in which his own individual vision blended with mastery of his technique in the startling anti-war canvas--"Guernica," an enormous canvas on which not an inch is wasted space.

Playwrights, also--(if they have the luxury of a lifetime career) go through these three phases: take Ibsen for an example--beginning his playwriting career with imitation of the genre of his day in the romantic poetic tragedy Catiline, then experimentally applying the Scribian "well-made play" formula to social problems as in A Doll's House, and finally soaring into his own mystical universe with Rosmersholm and When We Dead Awaken.

In the introductory undergraduate playwriting class that I

have an opportunity to conduct in alternate years at Montclair State College in New Jersey most of the students are sadly lacking in their knowledge of either classical or contemporary plays that might be discussed as models. And the students themselves come from a variety of backgrounds and interests. Typically my twenty-member class of juniors and seniors consists of fourteen theatre majors and six English majors. The theatre majors will have had one three-hour course of play analysis in which they will have read about a dozen full-length plays, one semester of play direction with some attention given to the analysis of either a full-length or short play, and from two to five semesters of acting. The English majors will have had none of the theatre courses, but will have taken one or two courses in Shakespeare, some American and English literature, and one or two creative writing courses in the English department in which they focused on short stories. (Some of the English majors also may have had a playwriting course taught in the English Department, but the reading of plays and play analysis is not a part of their study in that course.) Also the motivation of both groups of students varies from those who seriously would like to write a performable play to those who simply think that writing a play is an interesting form for their own self-expression. In brief, the course I offer is not part of a professionally

oriented program to turn out the next Tennessee Williams or Neil Simon.

What then are the goals of such a class? I think four primary goals can be identified which cover to a reasonable extent both the needs of the casually interested student and the student who with some signs of talent might be encouraged to develop their craft and insights further. The four goals of the class are:

1. To sharpen the students' critical awareness of the craft and techniques of writing plays.

2. To broaden the students' appreciation for a variety of forms and ideas used in contemporary plays.

3. To expose students to interesting models of contemporary play forms.

4. To guide and encourage students in the development of their own playscripts.

In order to accomplish these goals the student explores three areas:

1. Forms & Techniques: through lecture/discussion and application to:

2. Models: study of individual short plays

taken from a
current volume of Best Short Plays, published annually by
Chilton Book Company;

3. Writing Assignments: which include the adaptation of a short story into play form and the writing of an original one-act play in progressive assignments, beginning with germinal ideas through scenarios, and first and second drafts.

To examine the second phase--the use of models more closely I will here indicate the focus of attention which might be used for the study of plays from the 1982 volume of Best Short Plays and have prepared copies of possible study focus categories for the '81, '82, and '83 volumes (The 1983 volume will be available about the first week in September). It should be noted further that discussions of the plays, while focused on a particular element of the play, are by no means limited to that single element. The discussion topics I choose to focus on are:

1. The development of conflict & action structure
2. The development of suspense or non-conflict structure
3. Episodic or collage structure
4. The development of a dramatic issue

5. The development of character

6. The use of language

7. The creation of mood

8. The development of theme

9. The techniques of comedy

Using the 1982 edition of Best Short Plays as an example today I might select: for 1. The development of conflict and action: the play "Today a Little Extra" by Michael Kassin. This play is a touching incident in the life of a Jewish butchershop owner who reluctantly must relinquish the management of his store to the callow son of the new owner. Subtopics we would consider in our discussion of action development in this play would be: the point of attack, specific devices of exposition, the inciting force, climactic moments, and the final resolution of the conflict. Both the overall design of the play's action/conflict development and individual motivational unit development would be explored in the discussion of the play.

In contrast to the strongly developed rising conflict structure, students would then study 2.a non-conflict, or suspense structured play, in the 1982 volume: "Ball Boys" by David Edgar, a play in which two lower class British boys plot to kill a privileged classed Swedish tennis star. In

plays with this structure we look at thepreparation and suspense devices the author uses to propel the audience attention forward toward a major event.

In the third category--episodic or collage structure--Beverley Byers Pevitts' "Reflections in a Window" can be used to demonstrate how a tightly woven play-within-a-play may be counterpointed with a thematic collage chorus. In this play a chorus of elderly women confined to a nursing home reflect in their own lives the tensions within a family visiting their one hundred year old mother and grandmother.

The fourth topic--the dramatic issue--may be illustrated by David Henry Hwang's "The Dance and the Railroad," an examination of the values and differences between manual labor and art with an inscrutable oriental slant in style.

The fifth topic--character development--could use Lanford Wilson's "Thymus Vulgaris"--a portrait of an estranged mother and her Los Vegas prostitute daughter--to demonstrate the use of characters' past and present relationships; characterizing details, actions, and activities; contrasts of character's dialogue; and how characters attempt to influence or manipulate each other.

For the sixth area--use of language--John Guare's "In

Fireworks Lie Secret Codes" would be a good model. Not only are all the poetic devices of imagery used in the dialogue, but there are strong contrasts of language usage in word selection and syntax among the characters, whose names are given only as numbers.

The seventh item--mood--can be studied in John Olive's "Minnesota Moon." Environmental details, which contribute to mood; speech rhythms and the use of pauses; and contrasts of emotional attitudes; may be considered in the creation of mood in this poignant farewell scene between two Minnesota high school seniors--one probably headed for Viet Nam, the other for college.

For the eighth item--the development of theme--an examination of sanity and insanity--is interestingly developed between a theatre director son and his institutionalized father in Percy Granger's "Vivien." In this play, character activity, actions, and dialogue all contribute to the development of a significant thematic motif.

And finally, Mary Gallagher's "Chocolate Cake"--depicting an encounter between two weight-conscious women at a consciousness raising conference --may be used to illustrate some of the techniques of comedy--things such as character contrasts in comedy, types of verbal comedy, and humorous

activity.

Studying these plays (or any others, for that matter) and the principles they may illustrate, will not automatically make our students better playwrights, of course, but we could do worse than heed the advice of Lillian Hellman, who when asked for her best advice to aspiring playwrights, replied in one word: "Read."

Even poor plays may provide negative models, and any play read by the playwriting student may have the effect of exposing that student to one more approach to his or her own interpretation of life. As J. William Miller observes in his interesting book Modern Playwrights at Work, "An open mind is more likely to be well stocked than a closed one; comparative anatomy courses have assorted organs and even freaks pickled in glass jars however unattractive they may appear as objects of art." (Sherwood Anderson's short story "The Triumph of the Egg" even uses such grotesques as objects of art.)

Only after a student understands the basic dramatic and theatrical forms should the student be encouraged to experiment beyond them, for to write only what one feels is to flounder into a sea of formlessness, to thrash fretfully in the chaos of experience from which the designs of art serve as lifeboats and the architecture of artistic

structure stretches forward as a bridge to greater understanding and expression.

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APPENDIX

MODELS IN THE TEACHING OF PLAYWRITING

(Examples from BEST SHORT PLAYS edited by Ramon Delgado.)

Chilton Book Co. Radnor, Pennsylvania, 19089.

	1981	1982	1983
I. CONFLICT/ACTION	"The Former One-on-One Basketball Champion" Israel Horovitz	"Today A Little Extra" Michael Kassin	"The Color of Heat" Saul Zachary
II. SUSPENSE/NON-CONFLICT	(NO GOOD EXAMPLE)	"Ball Boys" David Edgar	"Old Soldiers" Martin Jones
III. EPISODIC/COLLAGE	"Definitely Eric Geddis" Michael Snelgrove	"Reflections in a Window" Beverley Byers Pevitts	"More Lives Than One" Norman Holland
IV. DRAMATIC ISSUE	"Great American Cheese Sandwich" Burton Cohen	"The Dance and the Railroad" David Henry Hwang	"A Need for Brussels Sprouts" Murray Schisgal
V. CHARACTERIZATION	"The Nightingale and not the Lark" Jennifer Johnston	"Thymus Vulgaris" Lanford Wilson	"Confluence" John Bishop
VI. LANGUAGE	"Reunion" David Mamet	"In Fireworks Lie Secret Codes" John Guare	"It Ain't the Heat, It's the Humility" Tom Huey
VII. MOOD/TONE	"Sister Mary Ignatius . . . " Christopher Durang	"Minnesota Moon" John Olive	"A Loss of Memory" Arthur Laurents
VIII. THEME	"The Exhibition" Thomas Gibbons	"Vivien" Percy Granger	"Andante un Poco Jennifer Johnston

IX. COMEDY TECHNIQUES

"The Pushcart Peddlers" Murray Schisgal	"Chocolate Cake" Mary Gallagher	"Charlie the Chicken" Jonathan Levy

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